



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF

EDUCATION

Outdoor Learning Frequently Asked Questions: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Recovery Period

(August 12, 2021)

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) issues this guidance to District of Columbia public, public charter, private, parochial, and independent elementary and secondary schools, as well as adult education schools, that are operating during the recovery period from the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Scope

DC Health's [Guidance for Schools](#) encourages schools to use outdoor spaces for instruction and activities, as feasible and as weather permits. Many schools in the District may have spaces already available for outdoor learning, e.g., school gardens and outdoor classrooms. However, most schools, including those with gardens and outdoor classrooms, do not currently have all the infrastructure necessary to provide instruction to students on a regular basis. This document serves as a complement to DC Health's Guidance for Schools and is intended to address frequently asked questions related to local education agencies' (LEAs') use of outdoor areas as viable spaces for classroom instruction and other school activities.

Effective Date

This document was released on August 12, 2021. OSSE will continue to add to and update this document over time.

For information and resources on the District of Columbia Government's COVID-19 response and recovery effort, please visit coronavirus.dc.gov. The CDC's most recent guidance for K-12 schools can be accessed [here](#).

If you have questions relating to this guidance, submit your questions [here](#), or contact Grace Manubay, environmental literacy coordinator, Division of Health and Wellness, at OSSE.HYDT@dc.gov.

OSSE, in partnership with DC Health, DC Public Schools (DCPS), and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), is also hosting biweekly technical assistance calls for LEAs and school leaders on the implementation of health and safety guidance. These biweekly Monday calls take place from 1-2 p.m. The registration link for the Monday weekly calls can be found [here](#).

Please note: any external resources included in the FAQ are intended to provide information but do not necessarily represent an OSSE endorsement.

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How to Begin

1. Is outdoor learning a reopening strategy we should think about for our school?

Yes! The CDC's [Operational Considerations for Schools](#) and the American Academy of Pediatrics' [COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools](#) include consideration of moving classrooms outside if the conditions are safe and conducive to a learning environment (must consider weather conditions, pollution, wildlife, etc.), as well as having meals outside to avoid congregating in cafeterias or being indoors with masks off. DC Health's [Guidance for Schools](#) encourages schools to use outdoor spaces for instruction and activities, as feasible and as weather permits.

2. What exactly is an outdoor learning space?

An outdoor learning space is any outside area where students and teachers can work together to learn, discuss, and explore. Many activities that take place indoors can be conducted outside. For examples, an outdoor learning space might be the shade under a tree, where students can sit in a large circle for a morning meeting. It can be a grassy area near the school, where a large event tent has been temporarily erected with folding tables and chairs. Or, the outdoor learning space can be under a canopy in a school garden. Outdoor learning spaces can be the temporary conversion of areas of your school grounds, or it can be part of a larger initiative to create new outdoor teaching structures.

3. Why should my school consider creating outdoor learning spaces?

Outdoor learning has the potential to address concerns about space limitations related to physical distancing, as well as mitigating the spread of the virus by decreasing the likelihood that respiratory droplets will spread between individuals because of the increased air circulation

outside. Because COVID-19 is mostly spread by respiratory droplets released when people talk, cough, or sneeze, accommodating this additional physical distance and air circulation can limit the spread of these droplets and thus the likelihood that the virus is transmitted in the school setting.

Spending time outdoors for instruction and meals provides [numerous benefits to students](#), especially in areas that have been severely impacted by the pandemic:

- Increased social and emotional health, such as social interaction skills, confidence building, problem solving, and independence;
- Increased academic achievement, improving students' ability to focus, pay attention, and be motivated to learn;
- Improved physical health, particularly related to increased physical activity; and
- Improved mental health, such as reducing stress and anxiety.

Outdoor learning is not a standalone solution but can be part of a school's reopening plan when implemented in tandem with other health and safety measures.

4. [Is outdoor learning just for science class?](#)

No, all students can benefit from engaging in various activities outside during the school day and out of school time. Many school staff can visualize meals, recess, and physical activity taking place outdoors. Outdoor learning activities might include, but are not limited to, morning meetings, reading circles, lessons across all subject areas, and social-emotional learning. For example, if a school needs to convert the cafeteria, all purpose room, or gymnasium into classroom space, consider establishing an outdoor area for eating or physical education. If the library needs to be used as instructional space, ask if the media specialist wants to host reading groups outdoors.

Planning Outdoor Learning Spaces

1. [What are the initial things we need to think about when planning an outdoor learning space?](#)

First, communicate with your school community that outdoor learning spaces are part of your school's reopening plan, to be used in addition to the indoor classroom spaces. Emphasize that anything you plan to do will be in keeping with current health and safety guidance. Next, determine areas on your school grounds that might work as an outdoor learning space. Then, make an investment in materials for this purpose. Lastly, encourage the teachers and staff to use the space!

2. How much space would a school need to consider implementing outdoor learning?

The amount of space a school needs will vary. As you view your school grounds through the lens of potential outdoor learning areas, think about the goals you would like to accomplish with the outdoor learning. How many students do you envision outside at one time? What are they doing? Schools must follow all applicable mandatory Mayor's Orders as well as DC Health and OSSE guidance. The current DC Health Guidance for Schools does not limit cohort sizes and recommends physical distancing of 3 feet between students in classrooms. One example that might fit your needs could be an outdoor learning space area of approximately 30-by-30 feet for one class.

Green Schoolyards America has extensive resources that help schools start planning outdoor space, such as detailed outdoor infrastructure planning strategies, case studies, selecting materials and supplies, and more:

- [Creating Outdoor Spaces for Learning and Play](#)

3. What are suggestions to manage set up and break down of outdoor learning spaces at the beginning and end of the day?

One way to minimize the effort of daily set up and break down is to create portable kits for students that they can manage themselves. For example, teachers could give each student a 5-gallon bucket to carry their individual school supplies; once outside, the bucket can be emptied, flipped over, and used as a seat. For larger items that may be difficult to move in and out of the school building each day, consider using a storage shed or other designated area that is easily accessible to the outdoors. Another strategy is to invest in materials that can be left outside in a designated outdoor classroom arrangement, which can be used into the future.

4. What are suggestions to address changes in weather that could impact outdoor spaces being used for educational purposes?

Set aside personal opinions about the weather and encourage preparedness and positive attitudes. When looking at your school campus, are there areas that are naturally shady during certain times of day? Perhaps the front lawn area is shady in the morning, or you have trees near the playground. Additional protection from the elements could include umbrellas, shade sails, or tents. Setting up space near a wall might help block wind. What are your school's policies for outdoor recess? Ensuring the students are appropriately dressed and prepared for the weather is equally important. School supplies may include weather-appropriate clothing, coats, sunscreen, and reusable water bottles. For further, more detailed suggestions, see the following:

- [Design Guidelines for Outdoor Classrooms and School Gardens](#)

5. What should we do if we don't have space for outdoor learning on our school grounds?

Parking lots, lawn areas, and playgrounds are among the campus areas that can serve as outdoor learning spaces. If your school lacks these types of areas, consider exploring other greenspaces such as DPR recreation sites, triangle parks or larger parks such as Fort Dupont Park. Many residents of the District live within 5 minutes of a greenspace, so these spaces are potential options for outdoor learning. The following resources may provide helpful information:

- [Using Public Spaces as Outdoor Classrooms](#)
- [Park Rx America](#) identifies parks within a 0.5 or 1.0 mile radius of an address

Creating Outdoor Learning Spaces

1. We need help figuring out what we should buy! What are the basic things we need? How much will it cost to create an outdoor learning space?

It might be overwhelming to start this process, but OSSE has created tools to help! First, talk to other teachers and staff to get a sense of how they might want to go outdoors during the school day. Next, consider the following categories as you begin creating your outdoor learning space:

- [Canopy \(protection from weather elements\)](#)
- [Seating](#)
- [Teaching supplies and storage](#)
- [Meal distribution and service supplies](#)

The costs will vary, depending on your vision. Low-cost, temporary learning spaces might have students sitting on a blanket and cutting up foam core boards to use as clipboards. Renting or purchasing a canopy (tent) plus folding tables and chairs would cost more. Picnic benches can double as classroom space and outdoor dining area. You can also consider “going big” and use this time to plan for more permanent spaces, such as a school garden.

Federal stimulus funds may be used to purchase materials for outdoor learning spaces. To help plan out materials needed and the estimated costs of an outdoor learning space, OSSE has created the following:

- [Materials Checklist for Outdoor Learning](#)
- [Procurement Tool for Outdoor Learning](#)

2. What does a physically distant outdoor learning space look like? How many students can use an outdoor learning space?

Outdoor spaces can look different across schools based on materials available and student needs. Explore alternatives to desks and chairs that students can manage independently, such as a personal clipboard and blanket or carpet square to sit upon. Tables and seating that is ADA-accessible may not be portable to move daily with ease. Consider accessible picnic tables or other outdoor furniture (perhaps used for accessible outdoor dining in restaurants) that can be left outdoors, or small folding tables and chairs that can be stored in a shed.

Green Schoolyards America has developed the following tools to help visualize spatial configurations of students in an outdoor learning space:

- [Potential outdoor classroom configurations](#)
- [Augmented reality visualizer](#)

Even outdoors, physical distancing recommendations should be maintained. In general, people do not need to wear masks when outdoors. However, particularly in areas of substantial to high transmission, CDC recommends that people who are not fully vaccinated wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people who are not fully vaccinated.

- For information on the current level of community spread, please visit <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/page/reopening-metrics>. Substantial community spread is indicated by a daily case OR positive rate in red in the chart.

3. What are some examples of successful outdoor learning models? Are there examples that we can visit and see in action?

Every school is different, and what works in one place may not work in another. However, many schools have shared their stories about how they were able to make some form of outdoor learning happen on small scales. Green Schoolyards America has also compiled national examples. See below for more information:

- [Photos](#) from District schools of various elements of outdoor learning spaces, such as outdoor classroom structures, meeting areas, seating, and more.
- [Webinar](#) hosted by the DC State Board of Education's Well-Rounded Education Committee
- [Case studies](#) from across the country

If there is a particular school you would like to visit or configuration you would like to see, please let us know by using this [form](#).

4. What funding is available to support schools, students, and teachers for outdoor learning?

By including outdoor learning as part of your school's reopening plan, consider allocating [ESSER-II](#) or [ESSER-III](#) emergency funds toward the following examples: the purchase of canopies, WiFi hot spots, seating, PPE, cleaning supplies, and technology.

OSSE's school garden program provides funding information applicable to outdoor learning spaces in the following document:

- [District School Garden Funding Guidance](#)

Working with Students Outdoors

1. What resources are currently available to support teachers in building skills and confidence to successfully engage students in outdoor learning? What about resources for accommodating children with specialized learning needs?

Managing students outdoors can be different than indoors. To help teachers envision, plan, and prepare to use an outdoor learning strategy, the following resources are available:

- [Tip Sheet for Outdoor Learning](#)

OSSE has archived webinars that focus on the following topics:

- [Outdoor Group Management](#)
- [Teaching Lessons Outdoors](#)

External organizations also have the following webinars that may be helpful:

- [Designing Garden Education to Support English Language Learners](#)
- [Bringing Social Emotional Learning & Mindfulness education into Your Work](#)
- [Building Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Outdoor Classrooms.](#)

OSSE continues to research, develop, and share additional resources as they become available.

2. Some parents and staff are concerned about students eating meals at school, since the kids will have their masks off. Could we set up an outdoor eating area that can double as a learning space?

Absolutely! Eating meals outdoors is a great way to maintain physical distancing recommendations that may be more challenging in a larger gathering space like a cafeteria. Students can pick-up their meals in the cafeteria or even better, outside, by class to limit lines. For additional information, please see the following:

- [Tip Sheet for Outdoor Learning: Recommendations for Outdoor Meal Service](#)

3. My school has an “outdoor classroom” area with picnic tables. How can I support my colleagues in using it?

That’s great that your school has an outdoor learning space! Sometimes school staff need a reminder that these areas exist. For example, the school administrator can make an announcement encouraging teachers to use the space during the school day or for after school activities. Consider sharing some of the [teaching tips](#) included with this FAQ. Lastly, let colleagues see YOU using the space, so they can see the practice in action.

Where to Learn More

OSSE has listed resources currently available. Additional resources are in development and will be posted soon. In the meantime, check these websites:

- OSSE’s [School Garden](#), [Environmental Literacy](#), and [Farm to School](#) programs
- DOEE’s [RiverSmart Schools Program](#) and [RiverTools Field Manual](#)
- DC Coalition for Equitable Outdoor Education [website](#)
- Chesapeake Bay Program’s School Grounds for Learning resources on [Bay Backpack](#)
- Green Schoolyards America’s [National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative Resource Library](#)

Further Questions

If you have questions relating to this guidance, submit your questions [here](#), or contact Grace Manubay, environmental literacy coordinator, Division of Health and Wellness, at OSSE.HYDT@dc.gov.

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